Mastering Windows Media Player 11

How Microsoft's New Media Player Is the Master of Its Domain

I t wouldn't seem like a new version of Windows if Microsoft didn't pony up a new version of Windows Media Player (WMP) to go with it. Vista is no exception—it includes version 11 of Windows Media Player as its dice-slice-rip-play multimedia powerhouse. With version 11, WMP offers big improvements in usability, support for portable media players, the Xbox 360 game console, CD and DVD burning, Internet access, network support, and file synchronization.

NOTE

After you configure WMP, you can start it directly from the QuickLaunch toolbar, next to the Start button, or from the Start menu. However, the first time you run it, you must run it from the Start menu.

WMP 11's Play Controls

When you start Windows Media Player, the Library view is displayed by default. The newly uncluttered Explorer-style interface uses a menu along the left side of the WMP display for selecting different views of your digital library (see Figure 8.1). The play controls are centered along the bottom center of the display, for easier access when running WMP 11 in a windowed mode.

WMP 11 enables you to move quickly from one level to another of a menu without excessive scrolling. In Figure 8.2, for example, you can click on either the navigation pane on the left or on the menu tree shown above the current item. This tree works just like the breadcrumb feature found in the Windows Explorer, except the available options are specific to Media Player. Note that by using the menu tree above the current item that some options can be selected that are not available from the left-hand menu, such as contributing artist, composer, parental rating, store, and folder.

1 Menu tree

2 Media navigation pane

3 Search field

4 Playlist pane toggle

5 Layout options menu

6 View options menu

7 Switch to full-screen mode

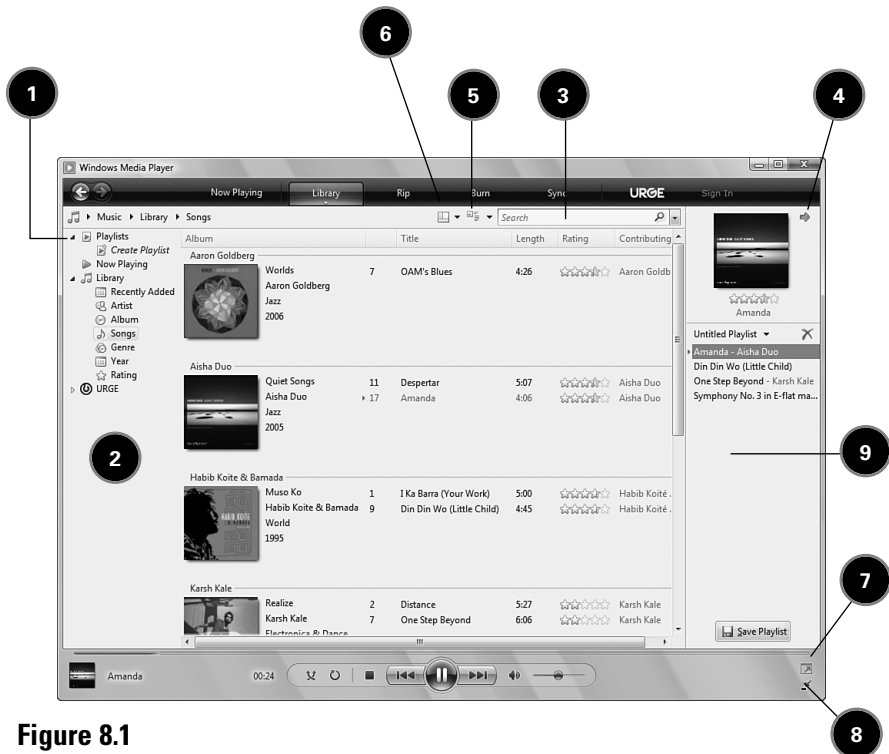**8** Switch to skin mode

9 Playlist Pane

Figure 8.1

WMP 11 provides an uncluttered interface with fast access to major features.

Figure 8.2

Use the pull-down menu above the current selection for additional options.

Just like when using a web browser, you can use the Back and Forward arrow buttons on the top-left corner of the window to access previously viewed items in the Media Player window and then return to a more recent view.

Playback Controls

In WMP 11, the playback and appearance controls have been significantly redesigned from previous versions. These controls are located at the bottom of the screen, but the playback controls (refer to Figure 8.1) are now centered and offer easier-to-understand designs than in previous WMP versions.

➡️ You can also use the Play menu to play media. See "Using the Now Playing Menu," p. 191, this chapter.

Multimedia File Types Supported
by Windows Media Player 11

The following table lists the file types that WMP 11 supports. Use it to help you plan which file types you want WMP 11 to play, and which ones you'd prefer to leave available for a different program.

Media Type	Extension	Notes
Video	.mpv2, .mpg, .mp2v, .mpa, .m1v, .mp2, .mpe, .mpeg, .avi	MPEG movie Windows video
Audio	.wav .aiff, .aif, .aifc .au, .snd .midi, .rmi, .mid .cda	Uncompressed audio file AIFF audio AU audio MIDI audio sequence CD audio track
Audio/Video	.asf, .wmv, .wm	Windows Media A/V
Playlists Shortcut	.wmx, .wpl, .wvx, .m3u .wax	Windows Media playlist Windows Media
WMP Skins	.wms .wmz	Skin file Skin package
Protocols for streaming Windows Media files	.MMST .MMSU .MMS	Streaming using TCP Streaming using UDP Streaming

Note that Apple's QuickTime A/V format is not supported by WMP 11; to get a player for QuickTime, visit http://www.apple.com/quicktime/win.html. To play back the AAC format used by Apple's iPod portable media players, use Apple's iTunes (http://www.apple.com/itunes/). Sony's ATRAC audio format is not supported by WMP 11; use an ATRAC-compatible media player and companion software for playback. See http://www.sony.net/Products/ATRAC3/ for details.

You can also view digital photos in common files types such as JPEG, TIFF, and others with WMP 11. Select Pictures as the media type or open the Library menu and select Pictures to view pictures in WMP 11. You can organize pictures by rating, by date taken, or by keyword tags. However, for more picture playback and editing options, use the Windows Photo Gallery (see Chapter 9 for details).

Keyboard Shortcuts in WMP 11

Don't be a mouseaholic! Give your mousing arm a rest and use the keyboard shortcuts in WMP 11 instead. Here's a comprehensive list of each shortcut and what it does.

Command	Keyboard Shortcut	Command	Keyboard Shortcut
Toggles Play/Pause	Ctrl+P	Open media	Ctrl+O
Previous track	Ctrl+B	Open URL	Ctrl+U
Next track	Ctrl+F	Close media	Ctrl+W
Rewind	Ctrl+Shift+B	New playlist	Ctrl+N
Fast forward	Ctrl+Shift+F	Add selection to library	F3
Shuffle	Ctrl+H	Full mode	Ctrl+1
Repeat	Ctrl+T	Skin mode	Ctrl+2
Increase volume	F10	Classic (top-level) menus	Ctrl+M
Decrease volume	F9	Refresh display	F5
Mute audio	F8	50% video size	Alt+1
Enable lyrics, captions, and subtitles (if available)	Ctrl+Shift+C	100% video size	Alt+2
		200% video size	Alt+3
Eject media	Ctrl+J	Help	F1

Classic Menus

By default, WMP uses a so-called "breadcrumb" and drop-down menu system. However, if you prefer the traditional menu bar (File, View, Tools, and so on), relax: it's not gone for good. WMP 11's traditional menus can be accessed in one of two ways: Right-click the lower-left corner of the display or press the Alt key on your keyboard and select Show Classic Menus. In any case the menus you can choose from include the following:

♦ The File menu can be used to open media or a specified URL, close media, save the current media file, create playlists, add selected media to a library, examine the properties of the currently selected media file, work offline, view recently played files, or to exit WMP 11.

♦ The View menu offers a huge number of options for adjusting the appearance of WMP 11 and how it plays media files. Using the View menu, you can select full or skin mode; go to other menus for the current media type; go to URGE or other online music stores; configure the Now Playing layout; download plug-ins; configure enhancements; select DVD features; view statistics, choose information (columns) to display for the current media type; and adjust video playback size.

⇨ For more information on working with skins, see the sidebar "WMP's Skin Modes," p. 181, this chapter.

⇨ For more information on working with visualizations, see "Using Visualizations," p. 192, this chapter.

⇨ For more information on playing video, see "Playing Video in WMP 11," p. 210, this chapter.

♦ The Tools menu provides a quicker way to download visualizations, plug-ins, and skins, enable or disable plug-ins, and it provides easier management of media information and media usage rights. It also gives you fast access to the multi-tabbed Options menu. Use Tools as an alternative to wading through other menus.

♦ The Help menu provides a mixture of local and Internet-based help options, as is typical with recent Microsoft products. Click Windows Media Player Help or press F1 to bring up a hyperlinked help page with links to online resources. Click Windows Media Player Online to go to the official WMP page at Microsoft's website. Click Check for Updates to check for and install updates (when available); the Windows Media Configuration Manager pops up to let you know whether there are updates you can install. Unfortunately, there are no links to Options tabs or a repair tool in case WMP 11 gets hosed.

*Feature Rating: **Help***

♦ The Play menu provides a complete range of play controls, including shuffle, repeat, audio and language tracks, volume, ejecting media, previous/next, and rewind/fast forward. The options available vary according to the media being played.
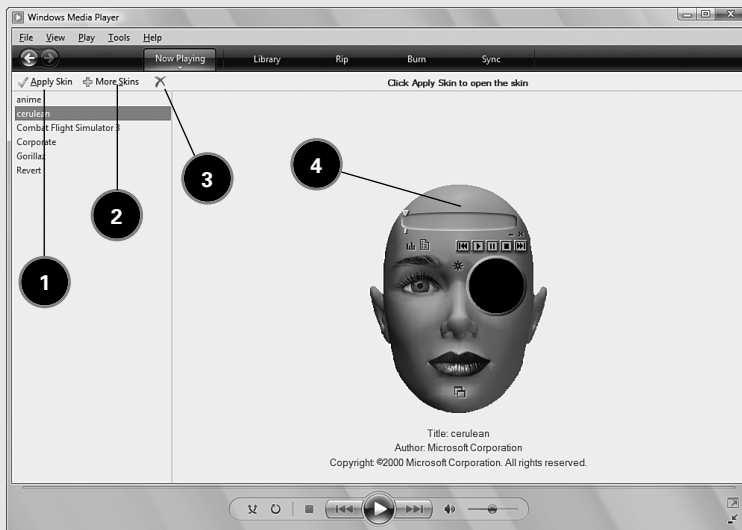
WMP 11's Skin Modes

If you like customizing your music player's appearance (and shrinking its onscreen presence down to a more manageable size), you'll love skinning WMP 11. Although WMP 11 includes only a couple of optional skins, including Corporate, which resembles the minimal interface used by old versions of WMP, and Revert, which is a reduced-size player window useful for digital music (and a carryover from WMP 10, by the way), you can download many more skins.

To see more choices, click Skin Chooser from the View menu and click More Skins from the Skin Chooser menu (see Figure 8.3)

to open the Microsoft Skins for Windows Media Player web page. Browse skins, and click the Download link for each skin you want to try. To permit download, click Yes or Permit on any security warnings displayed.

Click View Now to use the skin as soon as it is downloaded, or click Close to leave it stored for later use. To revert to full mode after using a skin, right-click the skin and select Switch to Full Mode from the right-click menu. Follow the procedure in the preceding paragraph to download more skins.

1. Uses selected skin

2. Opens Microsoft skin download web page

3. Deletes selected skin

4. Preview of selected skin

Figure 8.3

WMP 11's Skin Chooser menu after downloading optional skins.

WMP 11 can use the same skins as WMP 10 and earlier versions, so you can recycle your favorite skins. To learn how to make your own skins, follow the link to the MSDN website from the Skins for Windows Media Player web page.

Downloading and Using Media Player Plug-ins and Enhancements

There are many types of plug-ins you can get to improve WMP 11:

♦ Audio effects (DSP)

♦ Rendering

♦ Other types

To see what's available, click View, Plug-ins, Find On the Web, which opens the Microsoft Plug-ins for Windows Media Player web page. Follow the web browser and security prompts to download, run, and install the plug-in you select.

After you install a plug-in, it appears on the plug-ins menu and also in the Tools menu.

Some plug-ins have two or more components. In such cases, make sure all components are checkmarked. To disable the plug-in, click the entries to clear their check marks. To re-enable the plug-ins, click the entries again.

Before you download a plug-in for WMP 11, make sure that Media Player doesn't already have the feature you want. WMP 11 includes a number of built-in enhancements to improve audio and video playback and other features. To select an enhancement, select View, Enhancements, Show Enhancements, and select an enhancement from the menu (see Figure 8.4).

1 Check to show enhancements

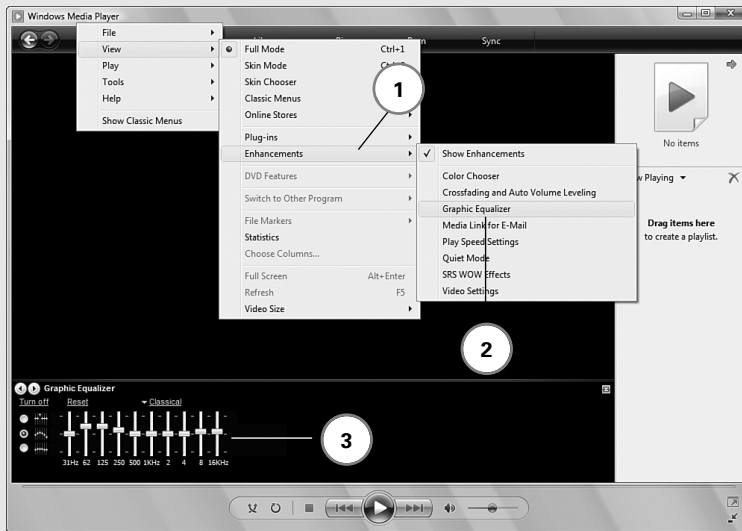2 Selected enhancement

3 User interface for selected enhancement

Figure 8.4

Enabling the Graphic Equalizer enhancement.

The enhancement's user interface shows up in the same lower portion of the display as a plug-in uses. Note that WMP 11 supports the use of only one plug-in or enhancement at a time.

Configuring WMP 11's Options

Several menus shown earlier in this chapter include their own Options menus. When you select Options in any menu of WMP 11, you open the corresponding tab of the Options dialog.

While most of the options tabs are similar to those found in WMP 10, some of them include some new features:

♦ The Library Options tab (see Figure 8.5) includes new options for sharing media over a home network and for auto-leveling of audio files.
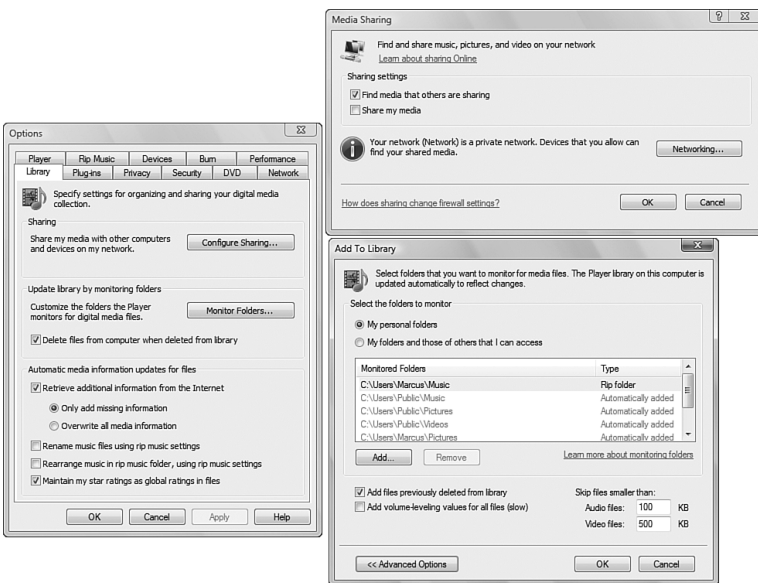
Figure 8.5

Manage media sharing, ripped music, and media folders with the Library Options tab.

⇨ For more information about setting up Media Sharing, see "Media Sharing and Your Home Network," p. 214, this chapter.

♦ The Privacy Options tab (see Figure 8.6 A) includes a new option for downloading usage rights automatically when you play or sync a file. It's enabled by default, but the default setting means you won't be notified of problems. I recommend clearing

WARNING

By default, media you delete from your library is also deleted from the computer. Make sure that any library files you want to delete are backed up elsewhere, or clear the Delete Files… check box. This is especially important if you enable the option to include media played from removable drives or network folders in your library on the Player Options tab. If you delete network files from your library with the default setting for deleting library files enabled, you could remove them from another user's system!

this check box as well as the Automatically check if protected files need to be refreshed check box.

♦ The Security tab (see Figure 8.6 B) now permits script commands and rich media streams to run inside a web page

♦ The Player tab (see Figure 8.6 C) includes a new option for starting WMP in mini-player mode. There's also an option to start the mini-player automatically whenever a specified filename is activated. For example, to play back voicemail messages (often stored as "voiceatt.wav").

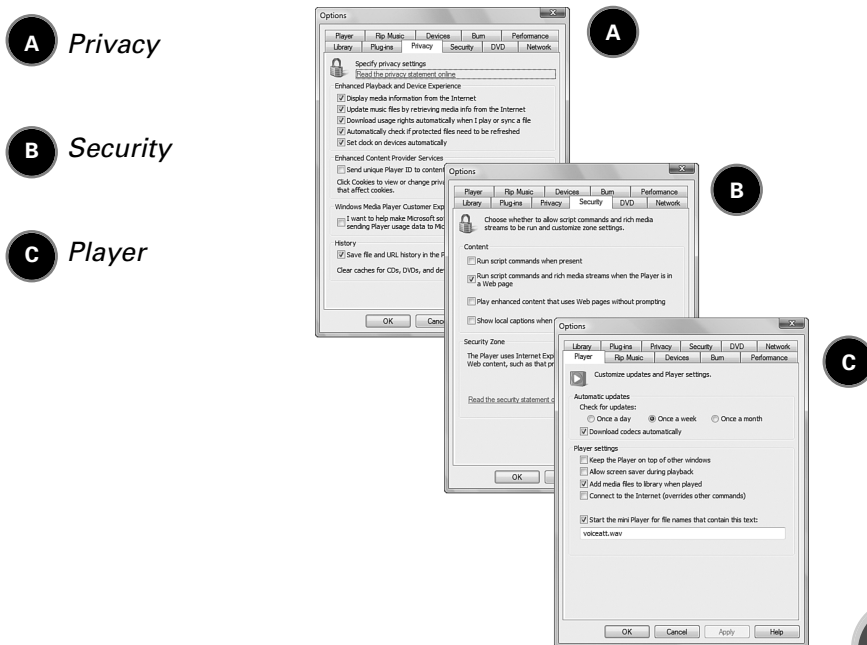**A** *Privacy*

B *Security*

C *Player*

Figure 8.6

Options tabs with new features.

The other options tabs you can use to configure Media Player require a bit more explanation. The Rip Music options tab, for example, provides a one-stop destination for configuring where to store and how to rip your music. Using this dialog saves time over working with the normal Rip menu.

You can now select two uncompressed (lossless) ripping formats: Windows Media Audio Lossless and WAV, and four compressed (lossy) ripping

WARNING

You can always convert a lossless format to a lossy format to save space on a portable media player (use the Device Options dialog's Advanced settings to configure conversion settings). Keep in mind that you can never restore the audio quality lost when you use lossy audio ripping.

formats: Windows Media Audio, Windows Media Audio Pro, Windows Media Audio (variable bit rate), and MP3. These additional options make it easier to select the best format for your needs and better support the wide range of digital music-capable devices on the market.

To determine the default settings used for each type of digital audio, select the format and look at the audio quality pointer at the bottom of the dialog. If you prefer a higher-quality default for any (or all) file formats supported by WMP, use this tab to adjust them.

Use Table 8.1 as a quick reference to each recording format supported by WMP 11. The highest bit rate in each format provides best quality but also the largest file size.

The Devices options tab, which provides shortcuts to the properties sheets for your optical drive(s), display, attached portable media devices and speakers, is unchanged from WMP 10's version. However, for better performance and video quality, consider changing many of the defaults on this menu. Here's what I recommend:

♦ If your system slows down significantly when you convert video, disable the Allow Video Files to Convert in the Background option.

♦ If your system has a dual-core or quad-core processor or two or more physical processors, try enabling both the video and audio background conversion options. These systems handle multitasking far better than single-core processors.

♦ If you see jagged lines or other types of distortion when you convert video, enable the Deinterlace… option.

♦ For best video quality, enable the Choose Quality Over Speed… option (which increases conversion time).

♦ If you're short of space on your primary hard disk (less than 1GB free) and you have a second physical hard disk with a lot of space, change the default location of the Transcoded Files Cache folder to a folder on that hard disk. For example, if your second physical hard disk is identified as E: drive, create a folder called Transcoded Files on that hard disk. Create a folder for each user in that folder. You can then change the location for user Marcus (for example) to E:\Transcoded Files\Marcus. When you create the folder Marcus, use the Security tab

> **WARNING**
>
> Although the default 128Kbps WMA file format setting isn't necessarily a bad choice, this is *your* music collection we're talking about. Do you really want to settle for adequate? (And before you answer, consider the time penalty you'll pay re-ripping your entire collection, should you change your mind and want to rip to a better quality.) Classical music and symphonic movie soundtrack fans in particular, might prefer different formats or higher bit rates.

to set the properties for the folder so that Marcus is the only user with full access to the folder.

Table 8.1   WMP 11's Recording Formats

Recording Format	Extension	Supported Bit Rates	Copy Protection Option	Notes
Windows Media Audio	WMA	48Kbps 64Kbps 96Kbps 128Kbps[1] 160Kbps 192Kbps	Yes	Use higher bit rates for classical and symphonic music; lower bit rates for spoken word or to create smaller files.
Windows Media Audio Pro	WMA	32Kbps 48Kbps 64Kbps[1] 96Kbps 128Kbps 160Kbps 192Kbps	Yes	Supports up to 5.1 surround audio; provides comparable quality to standard WMA at half the bit rate; also optimized for Windows-based smartphones.
Windows Media Audio Variable Bit Rate (VBR)	WMA	40–75Kbps 50–95Kbps 85–145Kbps 135–215Kbps 240–355Kbps	Yes	Some older WMA-compatible players may not be able to handle VBR recordings.
Windows Media Audio Lossless	WMA	470–940Kbps[2]	Yes	Performs no file compression for quality identical to original; creates very large music files.
MP3	MP3	128Kbps 192Kbps 256Kbps 320Kbps	No (Hooray!)	Works with virtually any portable music player.
WAV	WAV	1411.2 Kbps	No	Performs no file compression for quality identical to original; creates very large music files (larger than WMA lossless); best choice for audio that needs additional editing before use.

[1] Default bit rate in Windows Media Player

[2] Bit rate automatically adjusted during recording

To clean up outdated cache files, click Delete Files.

To configure synchronization and conversion options for your portable media device, select it from the Devices tab and click Properties. Use the Sync tab to configure when file synchronization starts and to reserve space on the device for other programs. Use the Quality tab to specify the quality level for music, TV, and video files synched to the device.

Use the brand-new Burn options tab, shown in Figure 8.7 A, to control burn speed, audio leveling, media information storage settings, and downsampling conversion to stuff more information on a disc (not recommended, but you have the option if you want it).

By default, files on CDs or DVDs burned with WMP 11 are organized by media type (for example, \Music\Artist\Album, \TV, \Video, and \Picture), with folders known as \Unknown Artist and \Unknown Album used for media that lack this information. If you clear this option, all media files are stored in the root folder of the media.

Enabling the option to convert media to a lower bit rate also changes MP3 and WAV files into WMA format, slows down the burn process, and reduces music quality (how much depends on the bit rate you select and the type of music you're converting). It does, however, allow you to squeeze more media content onto the disc.

Finally, there's the Performance tab (see Figure 8.7 B), which offers new features to support WMP 11's new DVD playback features.

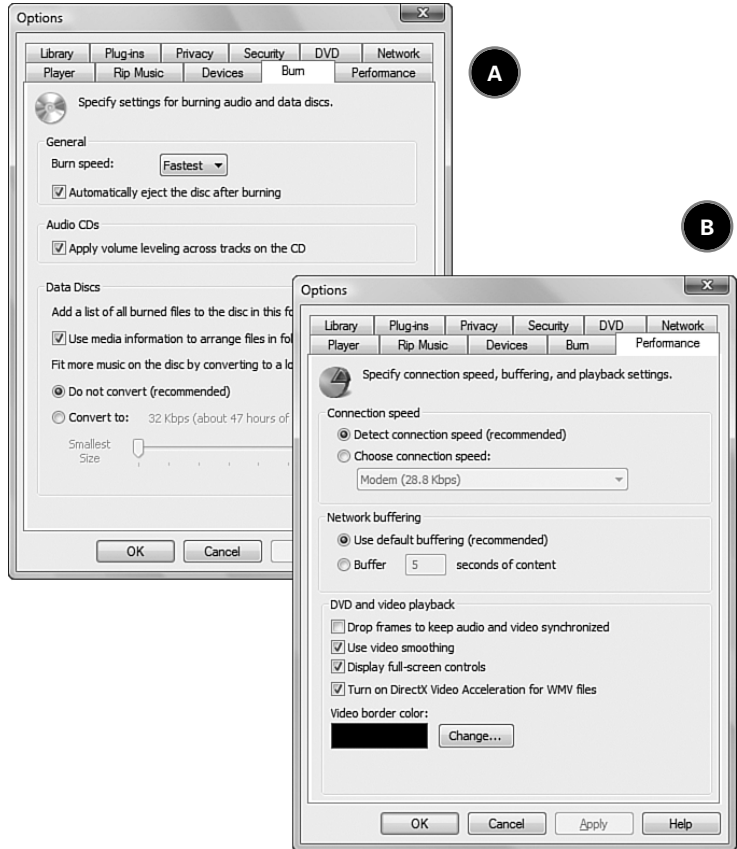Consider adjusting the default settings if you have the following problems with media playback:

♦ If you are not satisfied with the quality of streaming media from the Internet, try setting the connection speed manually.

♦ If you frequently have congestion problems that cause jerky playback of streaming media, try adjusting the Network Buffering setting manually, increasing it from the default of 5 seconds.

♦ If audio and video are frequently out of sync with each other, enable the Drop Frames… option.

TIP

To find out how many physical hard disks your system has (and the drive letter used for the second drive, right-click Computer and select Manage. Open Storage, Disk Management, and the hard disks and optical drives in your system are displayed. The first hard disk is displayed as Disk 0. If you have two or more hard disks installed, the second hard disk is Disk 1, and so on. Use a drive letter on Disk 1 or higher to speed up transcoding and other functions, including paging files.

⧫ If you are not satisfied with playback speed or smoothness when playing DirectX or DVD video, select the Enable DxVA Video Acceleration option.

A Burn

B Performance

Figure 8.7

Option tabs featuring support for DVD burning and playback.

Working with Audio in WMP 11

WMP 11 includes many new and improved features for audiophiles, including an easier-to-use interface, new ways of organizing your music, more ripping options, better file synchronization, and others.

WMP 11 gives you a bunch of options for getting down with your favorite tunes. Select an audio track in Library view and click the Play button, and it starts playing immediately.

For other play options, right-click a tune to view play options:

♦ Play—Plays selected track only

♦ Play All—Plays all tracks in selected album

♦ Add to Now Playing—Adds selected track(s) to Now Playing playlist

♦ Add to—Adds selected track(s) to a specified playlist

Music Library Viewing Options

WMP11 makes it easier to find the right music for the mood than ever before. In Library mode, you can select any of the following views to instantly organize your library:

♦ Recently added—Displays the most recent additions to your digital music collection with the same display options used by the Songs view.

♦ Artist—Displays albums in order by artist name, including album art, number of songs, average song rating, and total time (in minutes) for each album (see Figure 8.8 A).

♦ Album—Displays albums in order by album name, including album art and contributing artist/group.

♦ Songs—Displays the songs in each album in order by artist name, and includes album art, track number, duration (minutes:seconds), genre, album date, song rating, and contributing artist (see Figure 8.8 B).

♦ Genre—Groups albums by genre, average song rating, and total time (in minutes).

♦ Year—Displays albums sorted by decade, and groups albums produced in a particular year together, including album art, date, total time (in minutes), and average song rating (see Figure 8.8 C).

NOTE

First Names Only

The Artist view sorts albums by the first name of the artist or group. Thus, Ludwig van Beethoven is listed before The Posies.

TIP

Windows Media Player 11, like other parts of Windows Vista, stacks related items together (see the year 2005 in Figure 8.8 C for an example). When more than one item is visible in a stack, double-click the stack to see all the stacked items.

♦ Ratings—Displays star ratings you assign (My Ratings) and Auto Ratings (based on how often you play an album. Click each star to see which songs received the rating.
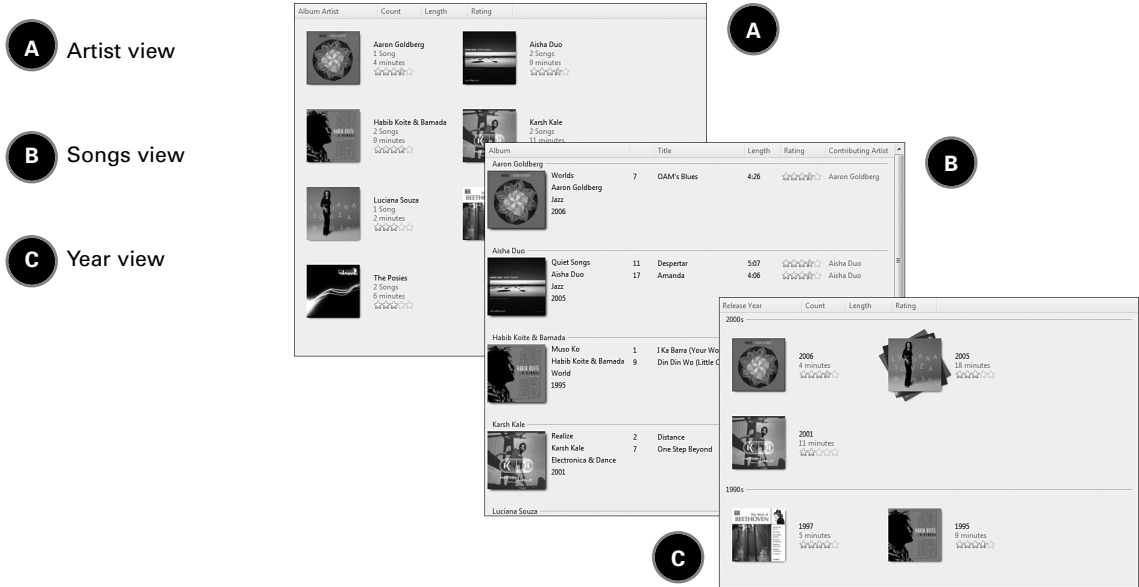
A Artist view

B Songs view

C Year view

Figure 8.8

Various Music Library views.

To choose additional views (contributing artist, composer, parental rating, online stores, and folder), click the Library icon in the left pane.

*Feature Rating: **Music Library***

Searching for Media with WordWheel

WMP 11 features a search tool powered by Vista's WordWheel search technology in the upper-right corner of the main program window. Before entering search text, select the view to search from the left-hand menu. If you select Library or Playlists before entering search text, WMP 11 displays artists, album titles, or song titles that match the text entered. Note that WMP 11 also searches your music store (if any) for matches.

To search for specific artists, songs, or albums, highlight the applicable view under My Library before entering search text.

In Figure 8.9 A, the search text "Be" was used after selecting Library, resulting in matches with two artists, two albums, and eight songs in the

local library. To see the matches, click the underlined links. Figure 8.9 B shows the results for the same search text if the Songs view is selected, again resulting in eight songs, but this time across three albums.
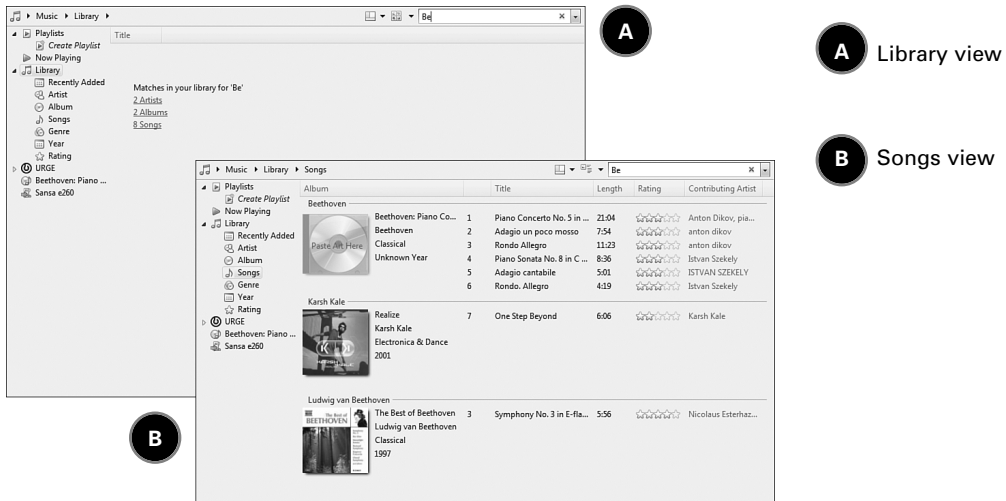

A Library view

B Songs view

Figure 8.9

Searching for media with WMP's WordWheel search match feature.

The Search tool can also be used to locate any other type of media that WMP 11 supports, such as pictures, video, recorded TV, or other media.

For more information about using the Playlist feature, see "Creating Playlists," p. 200, this chapter.

*Feature Rating: **Search***

Using the Now Playing Menu

The Now Playing menu, at its core, does exactly what it says. It shows you what's currently playing, along with any other music you have in your current playlist. However, it allows you to select what enhancements, visualizations, and plug-ins you want to use while your music is playing (see Figure 8.10).

When Show Enhancements is checked, the selected enhancement is displayed. When Show List Pane is checked, the current song list is shown on the right side of the WMP window. As Figure 8.10 shows, you can use an enhancement while also enjoying visualizations.
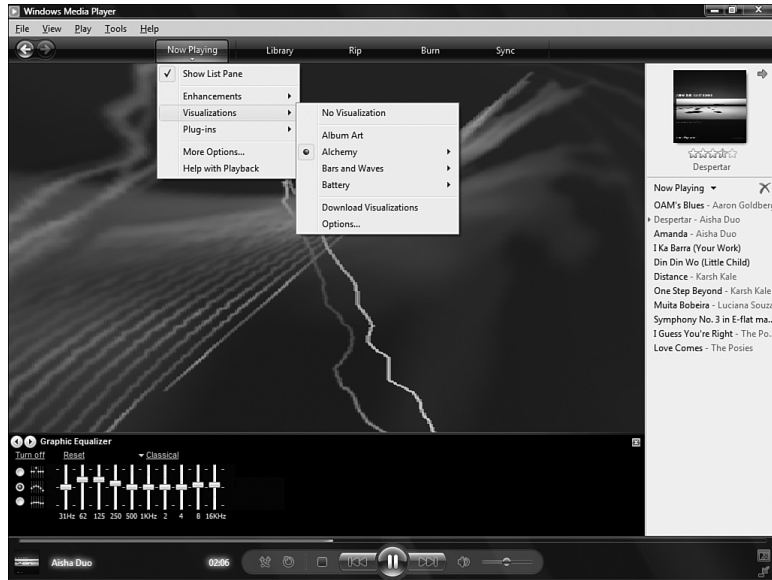
TIP

After you find the media you're looking for with a WordWheel search, select it and drag it to the Playlist pane for an instant playlist.

Figure 8.10

The Now Playing menu with enhancements, the list pane, and visualizations enabled.

The Plug-ins menu selection provides yet another way to download, select, or enable a plug-in. Selecting Options opens the Plug-ins options tab. Selecting Visualizations opens the Visualizations menu shown in Figure 8.10, which is detailed in the next section.

Using Visualizations

Earlier versions of WMP pioneered the use of visualizations, abstract patterns or animations that change as music plays. WMP 11's installed choices are similar to those provided by WMP 10, including

- Album Art
- Alchemy
- Bars and Waves
- Battery (the default)

Bars and Waves offers several variations, whereas Battery offers more than two dozen variations, including a Randomization option. To see the selected visualization while your music plays, click the Now Playing drop-down menu and open the Visualizations submenu (refer to Figure 8.10).

If you want more choices, click Download Visualizations. This opens the Microsoft Visualizations for Windows Media Player web page.

Downloadable visualizations include adaptations from popular live-action and animated movies, slideshow players with animated transitions, as well as abstract animations similar to those packaged with WMP 11.

To use a visualization, click Download and follow the onscreen prompts to Run or Open the visualization file when prompted. If the User Accounts Control warning dialog box appears, click Allow.

Now, you can go back to Windows Media Player, select the visualization you downloaded, select an option if provided, and open the Now Playing menu to see it in action.

In some cases, you may need to configure the visualization before you can use it. To configure the selected visualization, select Options from the Now Playing menu to open the Plug-ins Options tab. Select Visualization from the category menu, then select the visualization and click Properties to open the properties sheet for the visualization (see Figure 8.11).

> **TIP**
>
> WMP 11 can use the same visualizations as WMP 10, so you can recycle your favorite visualizations. To learn how to make your own visualizations, follow the link on the web page to the MSDN website.
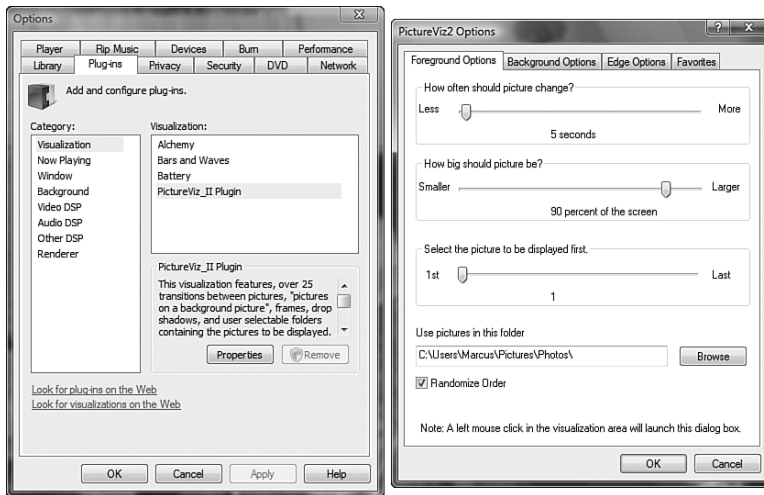

Figure 8.11

Configuring the background image settings for the optional Picture Viz II visualization.

1 Ripping progress bar

2 Toggles ripping start/stop

Ripping Music with WMP 11

To start the ripping process with WMP 11, select Rip from the top-level menu and insert a music CD when prompted (see Figure 8.12). By default, WMP 11 starts playing and ripping the CD as soon as you insert it if you are in the Rip menu (if you're not currently playing music). To stop music playback to enable faster ripping, click the Stop button in the playback controls at the bottom of the screen. By default, WMP 11 rips all tracks of the CD using Windows Media Audio (WMA) format at 128Kbps.

Fortunately, if you don't like WMP 11's rip defaults, you can change them! You can

♦ Select the tracks you want to rip

♦ Select the digital music file format (MP3 or WMA only)

♦ Select the bit rate

♦ Specify whether to use copy protection

Figure 8.12

Ripping a movie soundtrack album with WMP 11.

To prevent a track from being ripped, clear the check box next to the track. If you only want to rip a few tracks from the album, clear the check box above the track names and then check each track you do want to rip separately. Click Start Rip to convert all tracks into the current format and bit rate.

Open the Rip menu to select format and bit rate. Click More Options to open the Rip Options menu.

> For more information about formats and bit rates, see "Table 8.1 WMP 11's Recording Formats," p. 186, this chapter.

To select a bit rate for the current rip session, click Bit Rate from the Rip pull-down menu and choose the desired bit rate from the menu. The Rip pull-down menu also provides selections for ripping a CD as soon as it's inserted and ejecting a CD after it has been ripped.

Jens Adrian has a great comparison of different audio formats and bit rates in his Compare Digital Audio Formats article, available at http://www.litex-media.com/article/.

NOTE

There's absolutely no reason to enable copy protection when you rip CDs to any of the WMA formats. None—zero—zip—nada.

Better Ripping with Exact Audio Copy

Although WMP 11 does an acceptable job of ripping music from scratch-free CDs, it's not designed to handle problems caused by scratched or dirty CDs or pops and other noise in analog music sources (including CDs created from old analog recordings). And, you can't choose what encoder to use. If you're looking for a better way to convert your CD and LP collections into digital format, make sure you give Exact Audio Copy (EAC) a try. EAC is a freeware program available from http://www.exactaudiocopy.de/. EAC is designed to handle problems caused by less-than-perfect music CDs. It provides a huge number of extraction options, includes track editing and noise and pop removal, and can use a wide variety of encoders (which are not included in the EAC download). EAC is powerful, but complex, with advanced configuration requiring knowledge of using a command-line. DOS fans may cheer, but there's help for the rest of us.

To learn more about EAC, including where to find wizards to make using it easier, recommended command-line options, and sources for the recommended encoders, see The Coaster Factory's Exact Audio Copy Quickstart manual at http://users.pandora.be/satcp/eac-qs-en.htm and the Exact Audio Copy Guide from http://www.teqnilogik.com/tutorials/eac.htm.

*Feature Rating: **Audio Ripping***

Retrieving and Editing CD Information

You can edit "tag" information for a music CD before or after you rip it. This information can be as basic as artist, album title, and track title, or it can be as expansive as the release year, genre, composer, and much more (how much of a fanatic *are* you about your music?). Whether you intend to rip a handful of tracks or a virtual mountain of them, there's no reason not to take advantage of the track tagging feature to make sure that track information is complete and correct. By reviewing and editing track and album information, you help organize your music collection and make it easier to find the music that matches the mood.

Before editing incomplete or incorrect information, right-click any track and select Find Album Info. An Album Info dialog appears that attempts to match what it knows about your selected track (from its tag information) to its own online music database.

If Media Player has enough to work with, it's likely to come up with a short list of potential albums that includes the one for your track. If you find a match, simply select it and click Finish. Media Player will apply all known information about that album and its tracks to your music files, including the album's cover art (if it's available).

If you can't come up with an exact match, however, click the Edit button from the Album Info dialog to add or correct the album information (see Figure 8.13). This information is shared, by default, with WindowsMedia.com so that future searches for this album (by you or other users) will generate a match. When you're finished adding information about the track or album, click Finish to send the information to WindowsMedia.com and apply it to the track tags for your music files.

Tag information you have stored for your individual music tracks may not be complete or accurate, especially for older albums. To view or edit tag information, right-click the track and select Advanced Tag Editor. This opens the Track Info tab shown in Figure 8.14 A.
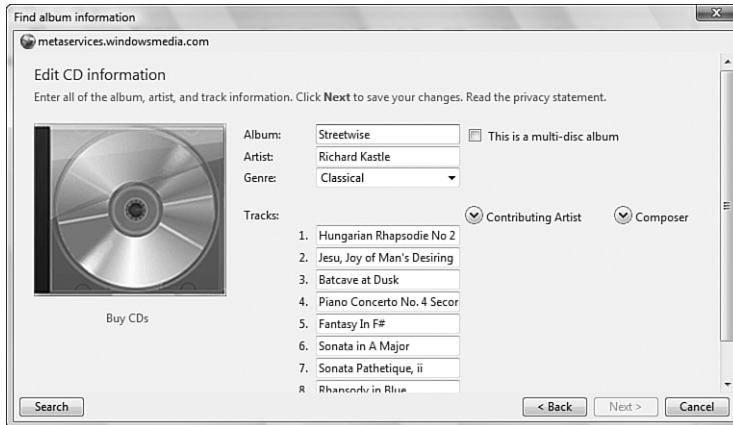
Figure 8.13

Editing genre and track information before ripping the album.

Making Your Own Album Art

If the album art for your CD is incorrect or missing, download or scan the album art. Reduce it to a size of about 200×200 pixels and save it in one of the following formats:

♦ JPEG (.jpg)

♦ TIFF (.tif)

♦ Windows Bitmap (.bmp)

♦ PNG (.png)

♦ GIF (.gif)

View the image file in Vista's Photo Gallery Viewer, right-click it, and select Copy.

In WMP 11, select a view that shows album art. Right-click the album art or placeholder icon you want to change and select Paste Album Art.

Use the Track Info dialog to edit the album title, select the correct genre, select a mood (mainly useful for Pop/Rock/Jazz music), specify the beats per minute, key, and other information useful for serious (a.k.a. obsessive) music aficionados.

Click the Artist Info tab to edit artist, lyricist, composer, conductor, and other information about the track (see Figure 8.14 B).

> **TIP**
>
> You can use the Advanced Tag Editor to edit a track while you're playing it. Use this feature to make it easier to determine the mood of a piece.

Click the Web Sites button to add or edit URLs for the audio file, artist, audio source, and other useful sites.

Click the Lyrics tab to add lyric text to a track. The lyrics can be displayed during playback. If you want to synchronize the lyrics to the music, click the Synchronized Lyrics button to open a special editing dialog. Use the sliders on the musical timeline and the Play/Stop toggle button to synchronize the lyrics to the music. Click OK when finished.

To see the lyrics while you play the music, press Alt, open the Play menu, select Lyrics, Captions and Subtitles, and select the language and style desired. Media Player then displays the lyrics in the Now Playing view.

A Editing track info with the Advanced Tag Editor

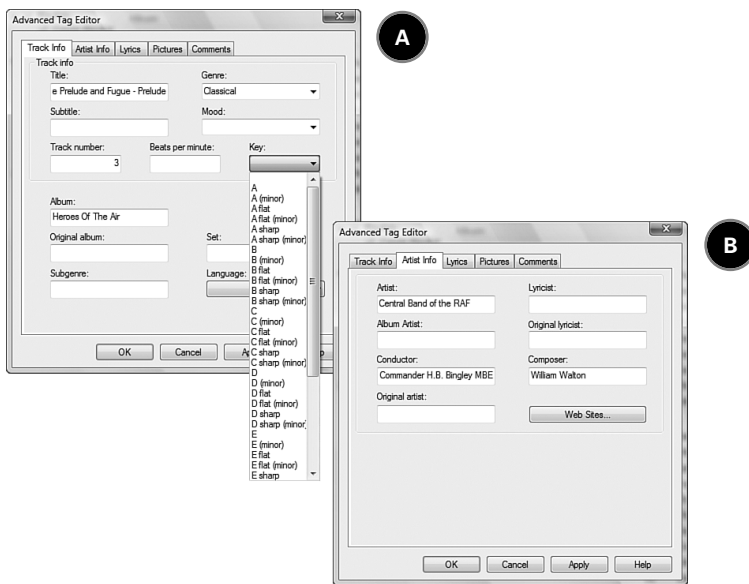**B** Editing artist and composer information

Figure 8.14

Using the Advanced Tag Editor to edit information about the truck.

You can also open a track's properties sheet to see the information stored for it, select Properties from the right-click menu. This opens a three-tab properties sheet. The default, is the File tab, which lists baseline track information such as length, bit rate, media type, and so on. For artist, title, album, and other information, click the Content tab. The third tab, Media Usage Rights, is blank if you ripped your own albums and did not copy-protect them. If you copy-protected the songs you rip or if you purchased digital rights managed (DRM) media online, such as downloads from an online music store, this tab displays media usage information (see Figure 8.15).
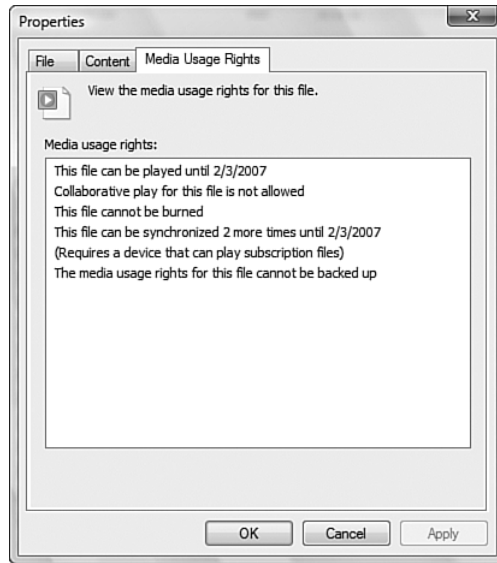
Figure 8.15

The Media Usage Rights for a song downloaded from the URGE music store during a free trial.

DRM and Digital Music Downloads

Digital rights management (DRM) is designed to prevent the unauthorized copying of digital content, primarily digital music. When you "purchase" a song from a digital music store, you are actually purchasing a license to use that music in ways authorized by the vendor. For example, music purchased from the Wal-Mart music service (http://musicdownloads.wal-mart.com) has the following features:

♦ Music is stored using the 128-bit WMA (Windows Media Audio) format secured with DRM.

♦ Music can be downloaded to a single computer.

♦ The music and the backup licenses can be transferred to up to two additional computers, enabling up to three computers to play the music.

♦ Music may be burned to a CD up to ten times.

♦ You can export music an unlimited number of times to a portable player that supports WMA format.

Other music stores have somewhat similar license terms (check out the FAQs or Help files before you buy digital music to find out what the rules are for any particular online music store). If you download

music through a subscription service or during a free trial of a music store, additional restrictions on usage may apply (see Figure 8.15 for a typical example).

DRM's job is to make sure that the usage limitations in the license you purchase for digital music are enforced. For example, if you transfer a DRM-protected song to more computers than you're permitted, the song just uses up space on the second computer's hard disk—it won't play.

How can you avoid DRM hassles, legally (and ethically)? Rip your own CDs! It doesn't take long with today's high-speed rewritable DVD drives, and the music you rip yourself has no DRM strings attached to it. More importantly to many, there are also quality advantages to creating your own digital music collection, too, especially if you have a good home theater setup: the music you purchase from an online store is often ripped at bitrate settings that may be acceptable for playback on a portable player, but won't sound as good as your rips will when you create them at a higher bitrate.

Creating Playlists

TIP

If the Playlist pane isn't visible in WMP 11, click the left arrow next to the Search box at the upper-right corner of the WMP display.

Whether you want to turn your PC into the 21st-century equivalent of a stereo with a stack of LPs or preparing to populate your portable media player with this week's favorite songs, playlists are how you'll do it. You can start the playlist creation process in any of the following ways:

◆ Create a blank playlist—Click Library, Create Playlist. The newly created playlist is, of course, blank. To fill it in, drag songs, individually or in selected groups, to the Playlist pane.

◆ Play Favorites—This option creates a playlist of songs with a rating of 3-stars or higher. Select a category from your music library (from the Navigation pane) and click the Play Favorites link that appears in the List pane.

◆ Create an Auto Playlist—Click Library, Create Auto Playlist. In the New Auto Playlist dialog, you can create a playlist that includes both music and other media on your system. Click the plus (+) sign next to Music In My Library to get started.

In the first set of criteria, you can select by album, artist, bit rating, various date-related settings, ratings, how often the music has been played, and others. Supply additional information as prompted. Add criteria as needed to select just the media you want.

Use the And Also Include feature to include other types of media, including pictures, TV shows, and videos to your playlist. You can select additional criteria customized for each type of media.

Use the Apply the Following Restrictions feature to limit the total size of your playlist by number of items, duration, or total size. Figure 8.16 shows a typical auto playlist that includes music, video, and picture elements. When you click OK, the playlist is stored, starts playing, and is listed in the center pane of WMP.

After you create a playlist, you can enjoy it on your computer or transfer it to a portable media player.

To save your playlist for reuse, click Save Playlist and provide a name when prompted. Your new playlist appears in the Playlists section of the left pane in WMP. To open an existing playlist, double-click it and it appears in the central pane. To edit a playlist, double-click it and click the Edit link in the playlist pane (see Figure 8.17).

To clear the contents of your current playlist, click the X next to the playlist. To remove an individual song or move it up or down in the playlist, right-click the song and select an action from the context menu that appears.
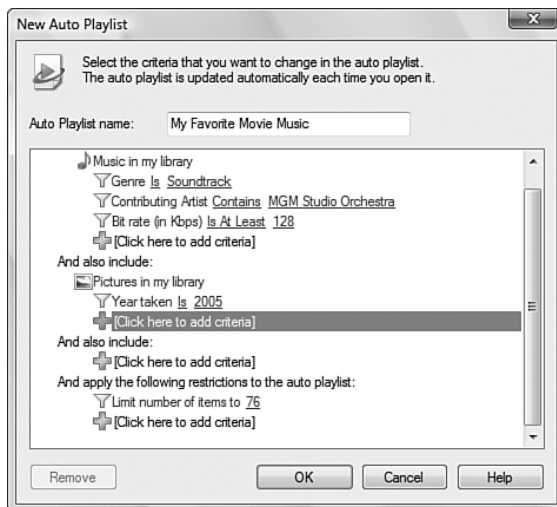
Figure 8.16

Working with auto playlists.

1 Playlists in left pane

2 Click to edit current playlist
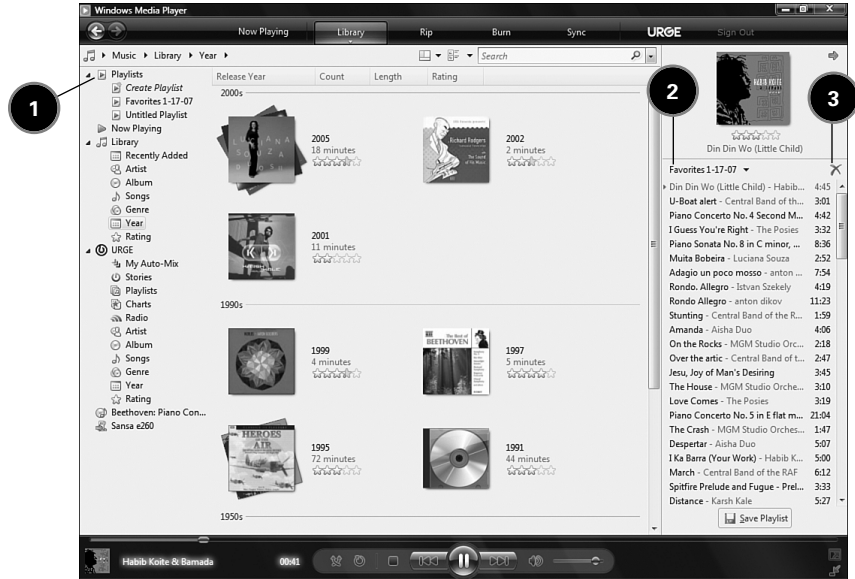
3 Clear playlist contents

Figure 8.17

Retrieving and playing a playlist from the Playlists section of the left pane

Portable Media Player Support

With so many digital music and video players on the market, and no shortage of downloadable music services, it can be confusing when it's time to select a player or service. Microsoft takes the guesswork out of selecting players for use with Windows Media Player. As long as the player is on the Plays for Sure list available at http://www.playsforsure.com/FindPortableDevices.aspx or its package includes the Windows Media Playsforsure logo, it works with WMP.

TIP

Wondering what music services work with Plays for Sure? Go to www.playsforsure.com to find music stores, services, and devices that work together with each other and with Windows Media Player.

What's Up with Microsoft Zune?

The new Microsoft Zune digital media player brings a confusing combination of advanced features and annoying limitations to the digital music world.

On the plus side, Zune (available in several colors!) features:

♦ Support for video, pictures, and music

♦ 3-inch color LCD working in portrait or landscape mode

♦ 30GB storage

♦ Integrated FM tuner (never miss "All Things Considered" again!)

♦ Wireless Zune-to-Zune sharing

♦ Integrated 802.11b/g Wi-Fi wireless Ethernet

♦ Magnetic earphones that automatically pause the unit when they're disconnected (Steve Jobs, call your office!)

♦ Automatic monitoring of specified folders for new and changed content

♦ Imports non-DRM content from Windows Media Player and iTunes, including WMA, MP3, AAC music; JPEG photos; WMV natively, MPEG-4 and H.264 video via conversion

However, Zune does *not* work with DRM-enabled music from any source other than the Zune Marketplace. In other words, Plays for Sure doesn't apply to Zune, even though both are from Microsoft! And, it doesn't work with WAV or WMA Lossless file formats either (so much for maximum audio quality fans).

Zune may (repeat, *may*) make sense for digital media newbies and for those who have digital media collections ripped from CDs they own. However, the inability of Zune to work with music purchased from third-party music stores makes it useless for anyone with a large collection of purchased tracks—unless you like buying the same music twice!

Learn more about Zune at Microsoft's official Zune website, http://www.zune.net.

Managing and Transferring Media to Your Portable Player

When you connect a supported portable media player to your PC for the first time, Vista displays an AutoPlay message from which you can click Play Using Windows Media Player to, from this point forward, automatically play the media already transferred to the player as soon as it's connected to your Vista PC.

If you want to automatically play the media on the player when you insert it, click the Always Do This… check box before clicking Play. If you want to transfer media to or from the player, close the AutoPlay dialog and start WMP 11 manually.

After you start WMP 11 and connect a portable media player, you may see a Windows Media Player–Device Setup dialog. Click the Sync This Device Automatically if you want to automatically synchronize the device with the playlists in the right pane. Use the Add button to move playlists to the Playlists to Sync pane on the right or the Remove button to move playlists to the Available Playlists pane on the left. Click Finish when you're done.

After starting WMP 11, select the portable media device from the left menu. If it already contains media, you will see a view appropriate to the media type. In the upper-right corner, a dialog displays the total capacity of the device and the amount of space remaining (see Figure 8.18). If part of the capacity bar turns red, as in Figure 8.18, the playlist is larger than the device's capacity.

1. Selected media player
2. Current capacity
3. Remaining space
4. Switches to next portable device
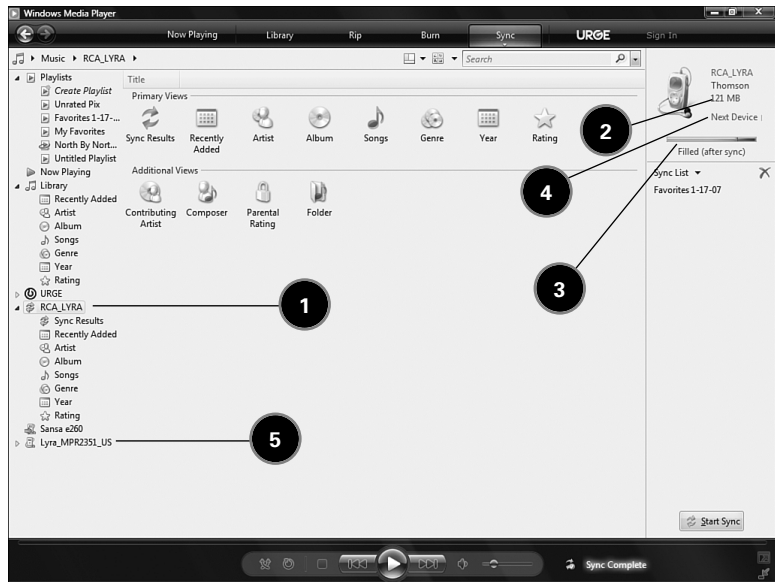5. Next portable device

Figure 8.18

Preparing to synchronize media with an RCA Lyra portable media player.

If your portable player doesn't have any room for new content or doesn't have enough room for the entire playlist (as in Figure 8.18), you can shuffle

music to the player (wiping out its current contents), or manually delete music on the player to make room for new content while keeping your favorite tracks around for another day. During the synchronization process, each track in the sync list is displayed in the Sync Results view, along with its status.

To dump unwanted content from your portable player, select the portable player, open the appropriate view, select the content you want to delete, and press the Del key on your keyboard. When prompted to confirm, click Yes.

Manual File Synchronization

To synchronize content from WMP 11 to your portable player, you can manually drag songs, albums, or playlists to the Sync List pane at the right (refer to Figure 8.18), or click the shuffle music link. To synchronize manually, make sure the player is selected, open the appropriate view, select the items, and drag them to the Sync List. When you're ready, click Start Sync to complete the transfer.

During the transfer process, Media Player displays a list of tracks to be transferred, along with an animated progress bar for each track so that you can keep track of what's been transferred and what's left to do. At the end of the process, the Status column should list each file as Synchronized to Device. The Playlist column indicates the playlist(s) you selected. If you selected individual songs or albums not in a playlist, the Playlist column lists Files You Added for those items.

Shuffling Music to Your Player

The process of synchronizing the contents of your portable player can be run in two ways: manual or automatic (also known as *shuffling*). Shuffling automatically transfers media from a playlist to your player. If you aren't shuffling a specific playlist to your portable player, you can click the Click Here link in the Sync List pane (which replaces the Playlist pane on the right side of the WMP interface.

To start the process, click Shuffle Now. This option automatically replaces the media on your player with the media in the Shuffle list. The status dialog above the Sync List shows how much space remains on your player. If the capacity bar turns red, your

TIP

If you're working with a lot of playlists and a device that's not big enough to handle them all, click the Shuffle What Syncs check box shown. WMP 11 will take care of the details for you.

TIP

If your flash-memory player has been upgraded with a flash memory card, the card may be displayed as a separate drive letter in WMP 11 and in My Computer. Click Next Device (refer to Figure 8.18) or select the drive letter corresponding to the additional memory device, then click Start Sync to synchronize files.

TIP

To delete an entire album's tracks at one time from your portable player, right-click the album title and select Delete.

Sync List is too large for the remaining capacity of your player (see Figure 8.18).

When you click Shuffle Now, you may be asked to click Yes to continue. If you're not absolutely sure that the music on your device is backed up elsewhere, click No. During the process, the music on your player is deleted to make room for new music.

A progress bar appears as the previous contents of your player are deleted. Then a dialog listing all the tracks in the shuffle list appears, and as each track is transferred the status changes (see Figure 8.19). When there is no more room on the device, the Shuffle process stops, listing the files that were transferred as well as those that were not.

1 Tracks that were successfully shuffled to the portable device

2 Tracks that didn't fit

3 Tracks removed from device

4 File being converted during shuffle to device

Figure 8.19

Shuffle lives up to its name, randomly copying songs from different albums in no particular order to your player.

If you prefer automatic synchronization but want to select specific criteria, right-click the icon for your portable player and select Set Up Sync…. Use the Device Setup dialog to select options for automatically synchronizing the device and selecting playlists to automatically synchronize, based on music ratings, frequency of play, and other criteria.

Automatic synchronization is enabled if the Sync This Device Automatically check box is enabled. The Available Playlists pane contains playlists you can select for synchronization. By default, playlists in My Playlists are selected. You can also select Sync Playlists from the pull-down menu for this pane.

Use the Priority arrows to move the selected criterion higher or lower in the list. Click the Shuffle What Syncs check box to randomize music. Use the Add button to move selected items from My Playlist or other playlists to the Playlists to Sync category. Use the Remove button to remove a criterion or playlist from the dialog.

If you're not satisfied with WMP 11's default automatic sync criteria, build your own. To create a new automatic playlist, click the New Auto Playlist button and specify a name, criteria, and restrictions, such as limiting the playlist to the capacity of your player. Don't forget to enter a better name than Untitled Auto Playlist. Click OK when you're finished.

To configure advanced auto synchronization options for your portable media player, right-click its icon and select Advanced Options. This opens the Sync tab of the properties sheet for your player.

The Sync tab, shown in Figure 8.20 A, has options for starting synchronization automatically, setting up folders, and reserving space for other programs.

Click the Quality (see Figure 8.20 B) tab to adjust the quality levels for music, video, and TV shows when transferred to your player. By default, the greatest compression level (smallest size) is selected for both types of media, and media recorded at a higher quality is converted automatically during the transfer process. The default is suitable for use with small flash-based players, but if you're using a hard disk-based player with plenty of space, you may prefer to click the Select Maximum Quality Level radio button for each type of media supported by your player and use the slider to adjust the quality level.

WARNING

Using Shuffle is easy, but it doesn't give you a lot of control over what is copied to your portable device. If you're album-oriented, rather than song-oriented, you may see the contents of different albums mixed together, and songs from an album in a different order than on the original.

To get more control out of how Shuffle works, click the Sync List link and select options such as clear the current list, sort by various criteria (Track Title, Album, and so on), save playlist, or start the shuffle process (Shuffle List Now).

TIP

If your digital media player is assigned a drive letter by Windows and you want to save space in your player's storage for use as a removable media drive or for use by other programs, adjust the Reserve Space… slider shown in Figure 8.20 A to provide the desired amount of space for other uses.

A Advanced Sync options.

B Configuring a digital music player to use 128Kbps WMA digital audio for better audio quality than the default 64Kbps.
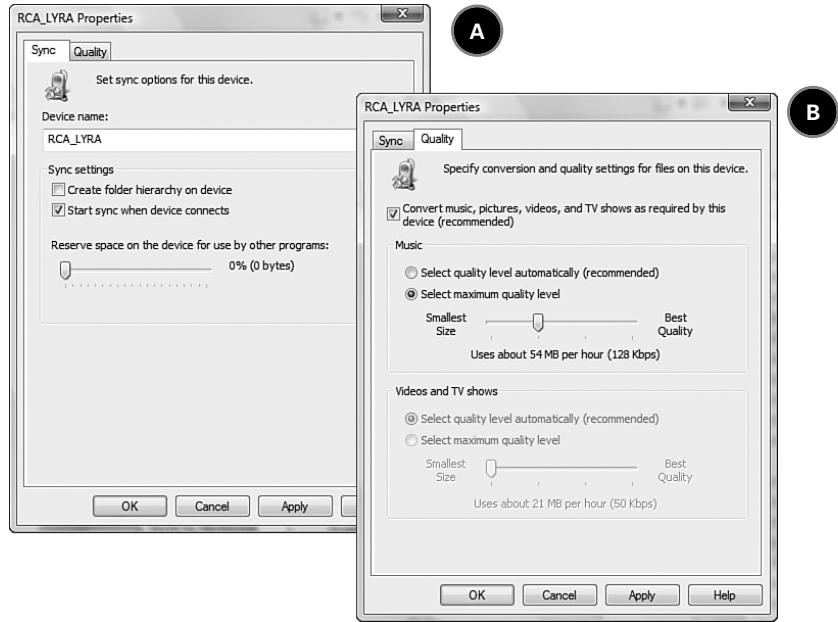

Figure 8.20

The options available on the Quality menu reflect the media types that your player supports. If you can't select an option, the device doesn't permit you to change the quality for that option.

👍 *Feature Rating: **Device Synchronization***

Burning a CD or DVD

You can burn any media in your library (except for media whose DRM settings prohibit burning) to a CD or DVD. Music can be burned to an Audio CD (suitable for playback in a boombox or set-top DVD player as well as a PC) or to a Data CD or DVD. This type of disc is designed primarily for playback in a computer with the appropriate CD or DVD drive but also works in many recent DVD set-top boxes.

To start the process of making a music CD, start WMP, select Music, open the Burn tab and insert a writable CD. Then drag songs from your library into the Burn List area at the right side of WMP 11 (see Figure 8.21), or click the link to burn the current contents of the Now Playing view. Click Start Burn to start the burning process.
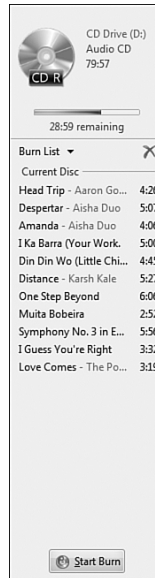
WARNING

Because WMP 11 normally reduces audio and video quality during synchronization to enable you to store more content on your player, feel free to rip your media at the highest-quality settings.

Figure 8.21

Preparing to burn a music CD.

During the burn process, WMP 11 converts each song into a CD audio track. A progress bar appears for each song during the transfer progress. At the end of the process, all tracks are listed as Complete. WMP 11 finalizes the disc and ejects the media when the process is complete.

To create a CD or DVD containing MP3 or WMA tracks, click the drop-down arrow on the Burn tab and select Data CD or DVD from the Burn menu.

By default, WMP 11 ejects the disc after burning it, and uses volume leveling to adjust the volume of each track (for balance). Clear the check boxes in the Burn menu to disable these options. To change additional settings, such as how to arrange the media on the disc, or whether to convert MP3 or WMA audio to store more on a disc, click More Options to open the Burn Options dialog (refer to Figure 8.7 A, p. 188).

The burn process works similarly for other types of media. However, if you want to burn video or pictures to a CD or DVD, be sure to choose Data CD or DVD as the media type.

👍 *Feature Rating: **Burning CDs and DVDs***

> **TIP**
>
> If you are burning CDs for use in older boom box or portable CD players, make sure you use a media type compatible with those devices. Older players may not be compatible with rewritable CD (CD-RW) media, and some might not work well with certain combinations of reflective layer and dye combinations on recordable CD (CD-R) media.

Playing Video in WMP 11

DVD support is the big news about WMP 11. Yes, you can finally use WMP to play your favorite DVDs without installing a third-party DVD decoder. Naturally, WMP 11 also handles other popular formats, such as Microsoft's native WMV format, the popular AVI format, and movies created with Windows Movie Maker. To work with video in WMP 11, select Video from the media types menu in Library view.

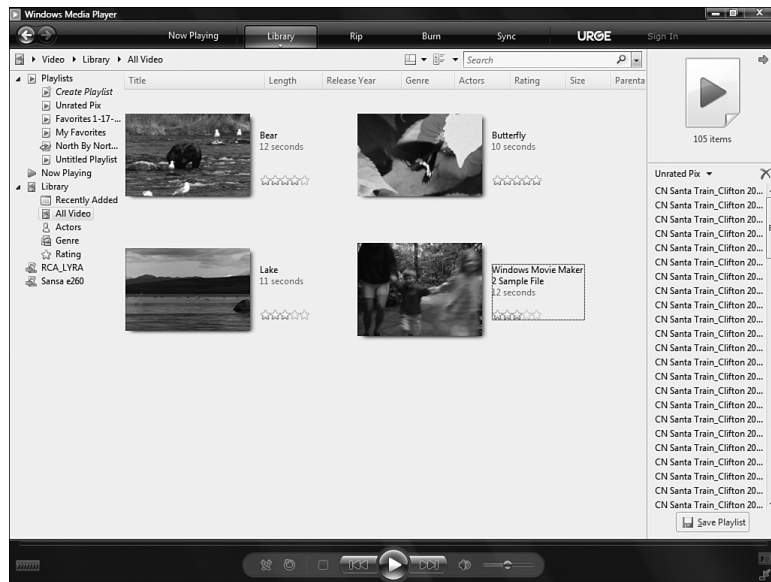Figure 8.22 illustrates the All Video view of the Video Library.

Figure 8.22

The All Video view of the Video Library, displaying sample videos provided with Windows Vista.

You can view videos by Genre, Actors, Rating (1–5 star or unrated), All Video (as in Figure 8.22), and Recently Added.

When you select the Rating view, WMP 11 displays two views at once, My Ratings (at top), and Auto Ratings (based on the number of times you play a video) below that. You can select videos based on either rating system.

Playing Videos

You can play videos in the same ways as photos and music:

♦ Select one or more videos and click the Play button.

♦ Right-click a video or selected videos and select Play.

♦ Create a playlist.

To create a video playlist, drag one or more to the Playlist area at the right of the WMP 11 interface.

Playing DVDs with WMP 11

The biggest news in WMP 11 is its capability to play DVD video. If you're satisfied with WMP 11's integrated DVD decoder's features and performance, you won't need to install a third-party DVD decoder program. To play a DVD, just insert it into your system's DVD drive. If an AutoPlay menu appears, select Play DVD Video Using Windows Media Player. On Vista versions that include Media Center, Media Center is also listed as a playback option.

If AutoPlay does not appear, or you stopped playback, open WMP 11, select Other Media as the media type, go to Library view, click the icon to display the contents of the DVD, and click the Play button.

Use your mouse to select scenes, subtitles, and other features. To view the movie in full-screen mode, click the Full Screen icon in the lower right-hand corner of the WMP 11 interface (or press Alt+Enter).

Use the DVD icon to the left of the Player controls to select special DVD playback options, including audio and language tracks, menus, camera angles, capture image, and to update DVD information.

To jump directly to a favorite scene, right-click it in the Library view of the DVD and select Play. To play only selected scenes, select the scenes you want to see, right-click the group, and select Play. (You cannot drag scenes from a DVD to the Playlist.)

Enabling and Using DVD Playback Restrictions

To block WMP 11 from playing DVDs with undesired MPAA ratings, you need to enable Windows Vista's Parental Controls for user accounts. Click Library, More Options and select the DVD tab. Click Change in the DVD

TIP
Don't forget that you can mix and match media in your playlist! Select the media type you want to play, drag over the items to the playlist, select another media type, drag over some more items, and continue until you have the playlist you want. Use Save Playlist to save your list.

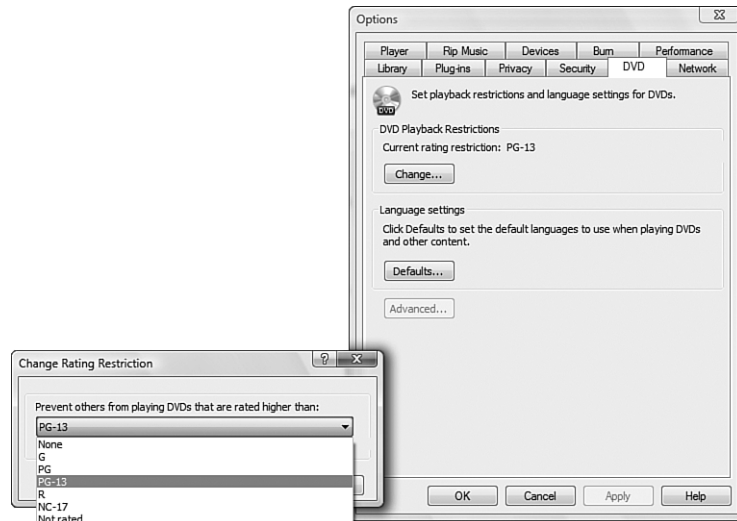Playback Restrictions section of this tab and choose the maximum rating you want to play (see Figure 8.23).

Figure 8.23

Selecting PG-13 as the maximum MPAA rating allowed for DVD playback within WMP.

NOTE

Only standard user accounts are affected by DVD playback restrictions. To make sure DVD play-back restrictions work properly, make sure the users you want to restrict have standard accounts. Also, keep in mind that some DVDs don't support this feature.

Click OK. If the User Account Control permissions dialog appears, click Continue to proceed. If you haven't configured your Vista user accounts for use with parental controls, Vista reminds you that these controls must be set up properly to enable this option.

When any user (standard, administrator, or guest) tries to play a DVD (see next Caution) that exceeds the playback restrictions set on the system, a 'Press Yes to Continue' dialog should appear (see Figure 8.24 A). Administrators can just click Yes and the movie starts. However, User Account Control kicks in if the current user is a standard user or a guest: these users must provide the password for the listed administrator. If they don't, they'll see a "This movie will not play" message (see Figure 8.24 B). Th-th-that's all, folks!

⇨ For detailed coverage of parental controls and user accounts, see "Managing User Accounts and Family Safety," Chapter 14, p. 329.

A This DVD supports playback restrictions (parental level controls).

B No administrator password? Show's over!

Figure 8.24

WMP 11 blocks movies it recognizes with a rating higher than permitted.

If WMP 11 doesn't recognize your DVD, you can use the Find DVD Info option from the right-click DVD menu to search for DVDs by title. You can also edit the information retrieved, or add information if the DVD is not in the database.

*Feature Rating: **Parental Controls***

WMP 11 and TV Recordings

Windows Media Player isn't just a platform for DVD video. You can use WMP 11 as a player for TV recordings made with Windows Media Center (.DVR-MS file format), a feature found in both Windows Vista Home Premium and Windows Vista Ultimate.

To review the differences between Windows Vista editions, see Chapter 2, "Windows Vista Versions." To learn more about Windows Media Center, see Chapter 9, "Windows Media Center the Vista Way."

To play an individual TV recording, select it and click the Play button on the WMP 11 player controls.

WARNING

Before you get lulled into thinking that WMP will always stop your kids from watching *Teenage Killer Zombies from Space* or other unsuitable drek, keep in mind that DVD Playback Restrictions work only for DVD movies that WMP 11 recognizes as having support for DVD playback restrictions. Unfortunately for concerned parents, there are plenty of films from all types of vendors that don't support this feature. Bottom line: If you don't want the kids watching stuff for grownups, lock up the DVDs. Don't expect WMP 11 to do your parenting job for you.

TV recordings are organized into the following views:

- ◆ Recently Added
- ◆ All TV
- ◆ Series
- ◆ Genre
- ◆ Actors
- ◆ (Star) Rating

If you want to edit the information used to categorize a recording, select the view you want to change, right-click the recording, and enter the correct information. Figure 8.25 demonstrates how to change a recording's genre from Unknown to Documentary. There's no pull-down menu of choices, so enter whatever text you want to use for classifying a recording.
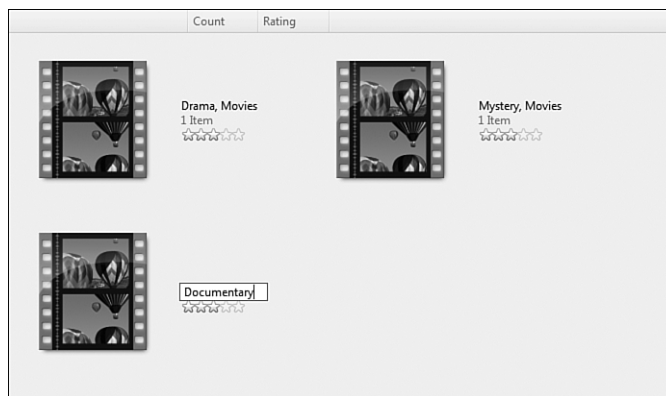

Figure 8.25

Editing the genre used for classifying a recording.

To add recorded video to a playlist, you can drag it to the Playlist pane at the right side of the WMP interface and use the Save Playlist button to save the playlist. You can also right-click a recording and select Add to Untitled Playlist or Add to and select Now Playing or a specific playlist.

👍 *Feature Rating: **TV and Video Recording Support***

Media Sharing and Your Home Network

One of the big features of the separate Media Center Editions of Windows XP was the ability to share your media files across a network. However,

even if your version of Vista does not include Media Center capabilities, WMP 11 can share files across a network and play media from network shares as well.

However, WMP won't share or use shared media unless you enable this feature. To get started, click the Library top-level menu and select Media Sharing…, or open the Library tab on the Options menu (refer to Figure 8.5) and click the Configure Sharing button. Either method opens the Media Sharing dialog you see in Figure 8.26.

Figure 8.26

The Media Sharing dialog enables you to share media and play back shared media on other PCs.

To play shared media on other devices (PCs, Xbox 360 game consoles, network storage, and so on), make sure that Find Media That Others Are Sharing is selected. To share media with other devices, make sure that Share My Media is selected.

Click the Networking button to open Vista's Network and Sharing Center. If you cannot see other users' libraries, or they can't see yours, make sure the network is properly configured.

⇨ For information about setting up and configuring your network, see Chapter 12, "Building a Home Network the Windows Vista Way," page 289.

Windows Media Player Tips and Tricks

Although Windows Media Player 11 has more goodies than ever before, sometimes it can be difficult to figure out the easiest way to get something done. Use the tips and tricks in this section to make WMP even easier to use.

Playback

♦ You don't need to create a playlist to play several media items. Just select them in the Library view, right-click the selected items, and select Play.

♦ To play an entire album or DVD, right-click any track or chapter and select Play All.

♦ Unless you're running a dual-core or quad-core processor (both of which handle multitasking extraordinarily well), you can improve DVD playback by making sure that you're not running other programs at the same time. You can also use the Performance Options tab to fine-tune performance settings.

♦ If you want to play music while viewing your pictures without down-loading a visualization, start your music in WMP 11 and then open up your Pictures folder and click the Slide Show button.

♦ For a more interesting slideshow, download the Picture Viz I or Picture Viz II visualizations and play your music. These provide interesting picture transitions without leaving WMP 11.

♦ To optimize audio playback quality, turn on SRS WOW effects in the Enhancements menu of the Now Playing tab.

♦ If you don't use visualizations and use WMP 11 only for music play-back, enable Allow Screen Saver During Playback.

♦ If you frequently play media on network folders or removable media drives, enable the option to add those folders or drives to your library to save time.

CD and DVD Burning

♦ The older the device you plan to use to play burned CDs, the more like-ly it is that CDs burned at the fastest speed might not play properly. You can choose from four speeds: Fastest, Fast, Medium, and Slow. Try using the next slower speed to burn media and then test it in the device if you have problems with your device not recognizing the CD. Keep going until you get to Slow.

♦ Use volume leveling only when it makes sense. Although it can save you from a lot of knob-twisting to adjust the volume during playback, it

can diminish the impact of quiet passages contrasted with louder passages in audio tracks. If in doubt, burn the CD with volume leveling disabled and enabled and see which result you like better.

♦ Rewritable CD and DVD media (CD-RW, DVD-RW, DVD+RW) are great for creating temporary mixes for use in your PC or in recent standalone audio players, but they can be problematical for playback in older devices. In those cases, use recordable CD or DVD media.

♦ If you want to create an enhanced CD (a disc that includes both data and music), use a CD and DVD mastering program such as Roxio Easy Media Creator or Nero 7 Ultra Edition Enhanced, instead of WMP 11's integrated burning feature.

DVD Playback

♦ To fine-tune movie playback speed to make it easier to find your favorite movie moments, open Now Playing, Enhancements, and select Play Speed Settings. The range of playback speeds vary by film, and you can change speed anytime you like.

♦ To eject a DVD directly from the left pane library view, right-click the DVD and select Eject.

Video and TV Playback

♦ For better performance when playing back WMV (Windows Media Video) and other types of video, specify Enable DxVA Video Acceleration on the Performance tab (refer to Figure 8.7).

♦ If you're having problems with a loss of synchronization between audio and video, you can drop frames (refer to Figure 8.7), but before you use that option (which will lead to jerky-looking video playback), make sure you have the latest video card drivers installed and are not running any other programs. Sometimes, these changes can help improve performance.

♦ If you're having problems with playing streaming video from the Internet, make sure you're not downloading other files at the same time, especially if you have a low-speed DSL (under 1Mbps), satellite Internet, or (shudder) dial-up connection. Giving WMP exclusive access to the connection can improve performance.

♦ If you have no problems viewing streaming Internet media at home or the office, but you're having no luck when you use a public network (such as a hotspot in an airport, library, or café), don't blame the Network Options tab. It's more likely that you need to set up Windows Media Player as an exception in the Windows Firewall.